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ISSN 2471-190X

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TEACHING AND PRACTICE

TEACHING INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGIES
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

By Vicente M. Diaz, Michael Dockry, Elizabeth Sumida Huaman, Thomas Reynolds, and Rebecca Webster

It has been argued that the twin ongoing and overarching crises facing students in higher education today are the urgencies of calls for justice and the threats from a changing climate. Indeed, these are inextricably intertwined. Students will face them no matter what their profession, or however they find themselves living as a citizen in the world. As Vicente Diaz reminds us so eloquently in his contribution to this collection, “the epistemological system on which our present political, economic, and cultural existences are based is unsustainable. We need radically different ways of defining what it means to be human, of understanding human-ness in relations of kinship and reciprocity, and of understanding and respecting the living world around us.” The other participants in this collection echo Diaz’ call, from a broad range of collegiate, departmental, and professional perspectives. The range and depth of the work represented here reminds us all that Indigenous ways of knowing are essential to our future, and must become part of the experience of all of our students.

The Hiawatha Wampum Belt, depicting the five original nations of the Haudenosaunee and their interconnections.
As part of this issue of Open Rivers, we are sharing work that demonstrates the ways that the University of Minnesota and community partners are engaging Indigenous epistemologies in education, research, and community engagement. While the issue stems from the work of the Environmental Stewardship, Place, and Community Initiative, we are eager to share a collection of work that demonstrates ways that others—both on and off campus—are expanding these conversations and doing work that exceeds this single project.

–Open Rivers editors

Vicente M. Diaz, Professor of American Indian Studies

What course(s) do you teach that integrate Indigenous ways of knowing? What is the course about?

AMIN 1001 Intro to American Indian Studies:
This is a survey course that introduces the student to the field of American Indian Studies through readings, films, and other source materials from multiple disciplines and from movements for political and cultural resurgence in Indian Country and the Pacific region. In a nutshell, it presents and counters the history of settler colonial law and society with ongoing histories of American Indian and Pacific Indigeneity. The course discusses aboriginal belonging to place in North America and Oceania, as Indigenous claims and conditions of aboriginal belonging are articulated through vernacular language and practices, and as they are further expressed through relations of kinship and relations of reciprocity between Indigenous people with land/water/sky scapes as well as with other-than-human personages.

AMIN 3312 Indigenous Environmentalism:
This is an upper level course that explores Indigenous perspectives on the environment through what’s referred to as Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge. The course, aka “the canoe course” uses Indigenous watercraft from North America and Oceania, as well as traditional ecological knowledge about water, as well as the relations of kinship and reciprocity among water, land, sky, and personhood (human and other-than-human) to examine alternative ways to define what it means to be human and alternative ways of understanding “nature.” Key in this course is the concept of Indigenous Relationalities or the fundamental relations of kinship and reciprocity that are taught to exist among humans and other-than-humans, and between them and land/water/sky scapes as personages.

Both courses address our department’s Student Learning Outcomes that include Learning Indigenous Knowledge systems and learning how to be a Good Relative or the embodiment of practicing Indigenous Relationalities of kinship and reciprocity with the world around us.
Why do you teach this course? What do you hope students are getting from the course?

AMIN 1001 is a gateway course that fulfills General Education requirements as well as the requirements for the three bachelors degree programs in our department (American Indian Studies, Dakota, and Ojibwe). AMIN 3312 is an upper level topic. I teach these courses because they address our department’s Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs), which I love, and want the students to take away from these and all of our classes.

The SLOs are:

**Sovereignty**
- Understand how sovereignty is a spiritual, moral, and dynamic cultural force that empowers Indigenous individuals and their nations to act socially and politically as self-determining agents in the world.

**Diversity of Native and Indigenous Knowledge**
- Engage the diversity of philosophies and cultures of Native people in North America and/or of Indigenous people across the world.

**Resurgence and Revitalization**
- Recognize the continuity and revitalization of Native/Indigenous thought, language, and political and social identities over time and into the present.
- Identify how Indigenous values and ethics inform the types of justice Native and Indigenous peoples seek for their communities.

**Being a Good Relative**
- Acquire skills to help them think about both Native/Indigenous nations and society at large.
- Accept responsibility to communicate what they have learned verbally, in writing, and/or through other forms of media.

From your position as a teacher and scholar, what kinds of institutional change do you hope to see moving forward based on the kinds of teaching you are doing now?

I refuse to compartmentalize my teaching and research and service, opting instead for engaged learning/teaching and research with Indigenous communities. The institutional changes that I hope to see are cultural shifts in the University’s relationships with American Indian and Indigenous people whereby the University of Minnesota (UMN) community—administrators, faculty, staff, and students—make a greater commitment to centering Indigeneity in all aspects of knowledge production. This means two things. First, the UMN community will recognize and understand that the institution and its knowledge practices are fundamentally predicated on the dispossession of Indigenous people of their lands and the subordination of Indigenous relationalities, referred to above, beneath Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment-based epistemologies and cultures that underscore and continue to inform knowledge production. Second, the University will work aggressively to replace such values with Indigenous relationalities and knowledge systems. This is important because the epistemological system on which our present political,
economic, and cultural existences are based is unsustainable. We need radically different ways of defining what it means to be human, of understanding human-ness in relations of kin-ship and reciprocity, and of understanding and respecting the living world around us.

Michael Dockry, Assistant Professor of Forest Resources

What course(s) do you teach that integrate Indigenous ways of knowing? What is the course about?

Environmental Sciences, Policy, and Management

ESPM 3014/5014 Tribal and Indigenous Natural Resource Management:
This course is designed to develop and refine the student’s understanding of tribal and Indigenous natural resource management, tribal and Indigenous perspectives, and responsibilities natural resource managers have for tribal and Indigenous communities. For part of the class, I use the SDI Indigenous model.

Forest and Natural Resource Management

FNRM 5140 Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Western Natural Resource Management:
This graduate course is designed to refine the student’s understanding of traditional ecological knowledge, Indigenous knowledge, and the relationship to western natural resource sciences and ecology. Students read and discuss foundational and current literature on the topic. The course has a focus on Indigenous scholarship. Students lead class discussions and prepare an individual research project (typically a research paper) related to the class topic and/or their thesis. Students also discuss and practice how to be good relatives.

Why do you teach this course? What do you hope students are getting from the course(s)?

I want to give students an understanding of tribal perspectives on the environment, forestry, and knowledge.

From your position as a teacher and scholar, what kinds of institutional change do you hope to see moving forward based on the kinds of teaching you are doing now?

I want all natural resource professionals to know how to work ethically with tribes, understand their legal, moral and ethical responsibilities for working with tribes, and how to be a good relative.
Elizabeth Sumida Huaman, Associate Professor in Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development

What course(s) do you teach that integrate Indigenous ways of knowing? What is the course about?

As an Indigenous/minoritized scholar, I aim to include Indigenous literature and scholarship, community member self-representation and speakers, and other Indigenous content throughout all of my courses. However, I have designed and taught two new courses at the UMN that incorporate Indigenous epistemologies.

Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development

OLPD 5122 Indigenous education:
This course examines the relationship between local cultures, knowledges, and education. Linked with the field of comparative and international education, this course pays particular attention to local Indigenous educational experiences and in the global context. These experiences are examined using chronological (factors of time), thematic (topical yet interconnected ideas), and critical approaches (issues requiring urgent attention), including analysis of historical trajectories of Indigenous education, the expansion of mass schooling, education and language ideologies and policies, and notions of resistance, agency, and innovation in educational design that address pressing concerns today. This course assumes Indigenous education as part of an array of anti-, post-, and decolonial strategies for Indigenous self-determination, and thus takes a holistic and connective approach towards understanding educational design, practice, and impacts as part of Indigenous knowledge systems. The course also assumes multiple definitions of education proposed by Indigenous and other critical scholars, highlighting education as a) formal schooling historically designed by non-Indigenous groups, b) ancestral education/Indigenous socialization, and c) Indigenous sovereign pedagogies. The course seeks to expand our understanding of the vital links between these different educational practices, in and out-of-school and across diverse places, from U.S. American Indian and Alaska Native communities to agrarian Indigenous communities in the highland Andes to the Pacific Islands and beyond.

Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development

OLPD 5080 Qualitative Research Design: Applied Indigenous methods:
Over the past several decades, Indigenous research methodologies have emerged as critical research worldviews that navigate, reinvent, and reimagine approaches to knowledge production through research. As research paradigms, Indigenous methodologies offer worldviews for research design rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems and self-determination concerned with efforts towards decolonization, healing, transformation, and mobilization. Using this qualitative research design course, one of our aims is to understand the tensions and choices that characterize the multiple negotiations that researchers and communities enter that transform research today. As such, this course reviews qualitative methodologies and methods while building on the work of Indigenous research methodologists who offer theoretical research frames (including
vital questions and challenges) and local examples of Indigenous research methodologies in practice.

The course is anchored by three processes:

1. We explore fundamental principles of Indigenous self-determination and their direct impact on Indigenous research design, including Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous holistic ecological planning, and theories of decoloniality;

2. We examine local examples of decolonizing methodologies with focus on epistemological contributions from Indigenous scholars from geographically, culturally, and linguistically diverse regions of the world, and we address their calls to examine power and ethics, including representation, participation, and accountability;

3. We relate Indigenous methodologies to research practices and methods, and specifically, aspects of qualitative research design—research questions, methodological selection, data triangulation, data analysis, and dissemination.

Indigenous research methodologies are highly contextual and participatory. While the course offers examples of practical application of Indigenous research methodologies through the development of research designs and methods by Indigenous researchers, there are no singular solutions or outcomes proposed by Indigenous methodologies. However, there are underlying political dimensions, ethical questions, investigative processes, and approaches to dilemmas that can provide common ground for discussion across communities and disciplines. Thus, our work in this course is to build fellowship as co-researchers engaging questions and strategies together regarding the following—How do researchers and the communities we care about define and practice knowledge exploration and production and for what purposes? What is the significance of co-designing research agendas? What do terms like “participation,” “transparency,” and “collaboration” mean? How can we develop principles of research ethics and codes of researcher conduct? What is required to develop responsible research agendas in the Anthropocene?

Additionally, under the Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Global Change (ICGC), I was invited to teach “Ways of Knowing in Development Studies and Social Change,” which I re-designed to focus entirely on Indigenous epistemologies (learning through and with attention to mind, body, and spirit) and project-based learning. Also through ICGC, I offered a seminar titled, “Comparative Indigenous Research and Learning: Methodologies, Social Movements, and Interconnections.” I am also the primary author/course designer for a new field-based series of courses in the College of Education and Human Development focusing on “Comparative Indigenous education research and design,” which will be launched in the next academic year (2023–24). It will include field-based courses with partner community sites in New Mexico, Peru, Japan, Canada, and Alaska.

Why do you teach this course? What do you hope students are getting from the course?

I teach courses that center Indigenous knowledges, knowledge systems, educational development, and land/environment because I understand and have experienced directly erasure and dehumanization of Indigenous peoples from an individual and collective community standpoint. The firm and unwavering presence of Indigenous knowledges within Westernized institutional/university systems is a critical political and epistemic project for Indigenous scholars and our allies.
That Indigenous theories and pedagogical practices have something to offer is not an assertion that I beg students or colleagues to understand, but rather position as among the most obvious humanizing possibilities for student learning and social change, especially in a time of accelerated global shift.

From your position as a teacher and scholar, what kinds of institutional change do you hope to see moving forward based on the kinds of teaching you are doing now?

1. Solidarities among multiple knowledge streams based on generous epistemological and pedagogical exchange openly discussed and supported by many kinds of educators at the University of Minnesota;

2. Strong, critical, and authentic partnerships with Indigenous nations that do not talk down, romanticize, tokenize, or burden Indigenous community members;

3. Explicit institutional soul-searching regarding the commodification of knowledges, including Indigenous knowledges and appropriation of Indigenous materials, lands, and stories.

I want for students to love themselves and to love their work, and to know how to do rigorous work that is of service to the people and places they hold dear.

Thomas Reynolds, Associate Professor in Writing Studies

What course(s) do you teach that integrate Indigenous ways of knowing? What is the course about?

Writing Studies 3315 Writing on Land and Environment: Although originally designed to be a course about environmental policy writing, I have changed the course so that it considers underlying understandings about land that are fostered through the stories we tell. I am interested in the ways that writing has shaped and is shaped by our relationships to land. This course is about how different writers have conceived such relationships through the genre of “Nature Writing,” a loosely organized set of texts that crosses disciplinary boundaries. I hope that students get a sense for how we write and talk about land, and how language used by settler colonists has often furthered an instrumental understanding of land as always available for use of various sorts. A counter-narrative also runs through the course in which Indigenous notions of reciprocity, kinship with the land and its non-human beings, and a first principle of respect and gratitude in relation to land play a central part. We read and write about Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* and other Indigenous texts and authors to get different perspectives and gain knowledge of the diversity of views among these authors.

Why do you teach this course? What do you hope students are getting from the course?

This course is part of the Writing Studies elective curriculum, and it enrolls students from across the University. I work with students to help surface ideas about land that have become submerged and normalized in Euro-American culture. I hope that by making explicit these
ideas and others based in Indigenous belief and knowledge that students will bring a rich set of understandings to their work in their majors and to fields and civic conversations beyond college.

Students begin, and in some cases continue, this work through class discussions, their writing in the course, and a collaborative video project.

From your position as a teacher and scholar, what kinds of institutional change do you hope to see moving forward based on the kinds of teaching you are doing now?

I hope that the University community continues to learn about and acknowledge its own involvement in furthering ideas and acquiring land while failing to acknowledge and value Indigenous life and well-being. I support moves such as the recent efforts to return the Cloquet Forestry Center land to the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa.
Rebecca Webster, Assistant Professor in American Indian Studies

What course(s) do you teach that integrate Indigenous ways of knowing? What is the course about?

American Indian Studies / Tribal Administrative Governance / Master of Tribal Administrative Governance

AMIN/TAG 3810 and MTAG 5210 Strategic Management:
This graduate and undergraduate course looks at getting the tribal community on the same page to move forward in the direction the community wants to head in. We use historical examples of how communities achieved this including the Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace.

AMIN 3830 and MTAG 5220 Tribal Operations:
This graduate and undergraduate course looks at how tribal governments function to respond to the needs of tribal citizens and deliver governmental services. We look at cultural matching, finding ways to incorporate traditional governing concepts into modern structures.

A common Haudenosaunee silver brooch, generally referred to as a council square or council fire, inspired our illustration of the cycle of strategic planning (see figure 2). Historically, this brooch represented a meeting. The outside logs represent the chiefs and clan mothers, and the inside logs represent the firekeepers. The clan mothers and the chiefs received input from the community before making decisions. As we will see, input from the community is key in successful strategic planning. Image courtesy of Rebecca Webster.
AMIN/TAG 4250 Tribal diplomacy:
In this undergraduate course, students consider historic and contemporary government-to-government relationships from a tribal perspective.

Why do you teach this course? What do you hope students are getting from the course(s)?

I hope students are able to rethink how they approach tribal governance. Tribes are not like state or local governments. They are also not like standard businesses. Tribes have rich cultures and history that predate all of these conversations. Sometimes we need to look back in order to find ways to move forward.

Before strategic planning, everyone is off doing their own thing, and everyone is headed in the direction they think they should be headed in. Strategic planning is a way to get input from a lot of people and build consensus about what direction the entire community should be heading in. After strategic planning, everyone is going in the same general direction down the river together. Image courtesy of Rebecca Webster.

The Two Row Wampum is one of the oldest treaty relationships between the Onkwehonweh original people of Turtle Island North America and European immigrants. The treaty was made in 1613.
From your position as a teacher and scholar, what kinds of institutional change do you hope to see moving forward based on the kinds of teaching you are doing now?

Mostly, I hope to see the recognition that education and history are not “one-size-fits-all” concepts. Not only do we all have different ways of learning, we have different ways of knowing that are equally valid in the classroom and in our careers. Indigenous students often use a different lens when they approach these topics. Also, Indigenous students are often taught to see through a lens that conforms to mainstream society that doesn’t acknowledge their unique perspective as an Indigenous person. With respect to non-Indigenous students, I think it is valuable to expose them to these alternative ways of viewing the world so they can head into their careers with a more open mind and an ability to view situations from more than one perspective.

Recommended Citation


DOI: https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.10129

About the Authors

Vincente M. Diaz is Pohnpeian and Filipino from Guam. An interdisciplinary scholar, Diaz founded and heads The Native Canoe Program in the Department of American Indian Studies, University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus. The program uses Indigenous watercraft for community-engaged teaching and research on Indigenous water traditions. Diaz’s research is on comparative Indigenous cultural and political resurgence in Oceania and the Native Great Lakes and Upper Mississippi River region, particularly through the lens of Trans-Indigenous theory and practice, which foregrounds Indigenous histories and technologies of travel and mobility and pan-Indigenous solidarity.

Michael Dockry: Bozho Nikanek! I am a registered member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and an Assistant Professor in the University of Minnesota’s Department of Forest Resources on the Twin Cities campus. I am also an associate faculty member of the American Indian Studies Department and an Institute on the Environment Fellow. I support tribal sovereignty and work to foster collaborative and respectful research relationships.

Elizabeth Sumida Huaman (Wanka/Quechua) is an Andean Indigenous faculty member in the College of Education and Human Development and affiliated faculty with American Indian and Indigenous Studies and American Studies, University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus. She studies the relationship between Indigenous lands, cultural practices, and in and out-of-school learning with Indigenous communities and tribal institutions in the Americas. Centering Indigenous knowledge systems, her work examines interfaces between modernity, exogenous and endogenous development, and Indigenous places; Indigenous community-based educational design and generative environmental pedagogies; and Indigenous and comparative frameworks and practices of decolonial rights.
Thomas Reynolds is an Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Writing Studies Department on the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus. He has published work on critical literacy and rhetoric/composition.

Rebecca M. Webster is an enrolled citizen of the Oneida Nation in Wisconsin. She is an Assistant Professor at the University of Minnesota Duluth in their American Indian Studies Department. Prior to joining the team at UMD, she served the Oneida Nation as an attorney for 13 years where she provided legal advice for the Nation’s administration on government relations, jurisdiction concerns, and a wide variety of tribal land issues.